

**ON THE RECORD**

**“Old octopuses become what we call senescent, or senile... and sometimes their actions are very inappropriate.”**

Jim Cosgrove of the Royal British Columbia Museum speculates about why an octopus recently attacked a small research submarine.

**“Please note that from now on, Orion’s Belt will be replaced by Chantelle’s Thong.”**

Columnist Lucy Mangan derides the decision to replace London Planetarium programmes with a show about celebrities.

**“You cannot ethically... infect humans and see if they get fat.”**

Leah Whigham of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, explains why she infected chickens, not people, with a virus linked to obesity.

Sources: CBC, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*

**SCORECARD****Moon mining**

Russia’s state-owned space company says that the nation plans to establish a Moon base and mine lunar helium-3 as a fuel for fusion reactors.

**Placebos**

Sham acupuncture works better than a cornstarch pill at easing arm pain, says a comparison published in the *BMJ*.

**Telegrams**

After 150 years, Western Union has sent its last telegram. The company, which also does money orders, says it will now focus on “financial services”.

**OVERHYPED****Bird flu in Austria**

Panic spread throughout Vienna last week after citizens reported some 40 dead songbirds. Autopsies showed that the H5N1 flu virus was not to blame. The larks, it seems, had developed an appetite for fermented berries, and got so drunk that they flew into windows.

# One place, one parent, two species

Evolutionists have provided what they hope is a definitive answer to the question of whether ‘sympatric speciation’ can occur in the natural world. This is where two or more species diverge from a common ancestor despite sharing the same habitat. The process has been taught as part of evolutionary theory for decades, but has been notoriously difficult to prove.

There are candidate cases, such as where parasitic species seem to have diverged on the same host. But solid examples are hard to pin down, as they require showing that two or more species descended from a single ancestor, and that the lineages did not spend any time apart during the entire course of their divergence — often a span of several million years.

Two studies in disparate parts of the globe offer what their authors say are the best shots so far at such a proof. On page 719 of this issue, Axel Meyer and colleagues at the University of Konstanz in Germany describe two fish species that have apparently diverged despite sharing a relatively small lake (5 kilometres across) in Nicaragua. According to Meyer and his team, it’s next to impossible that two such closely related species could have ended up in this very young (less than 23,000-year-old),

IMAGE  
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REASONS

Evidence found: two species of palm on an island in Australia seem to have diverged side by side.

isolated lake through two colonization events.

In a second study, Vincent Savolainen of Britain’s Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew and his colleagues report that two species of palm tree seem to have diverged on a remote Australian island (V. Savolainen *et al.* *Nature* doi:10.1038/nature04566; 2006). In this case, the remoteness of the island and the shared genetic traits of the species make it extremely unlikely that the trees are descendants of two ancestors that arrived at the island on separate occasions.

“Almost no proposed example of sympatric

## Political strife set to delay EU funds

**MUNICH**

A power struggle between the European Parliament and member states of the European Union (EU) threatens to delay the start date of the EU’s next funding programme for research — and that of its new flagship funding agency, the European Research Council (ERC).

In December, the EU’s 25 heads of government agreed a total budget for 2007–13, including a 75% increase in research spending by 2013. If the money rises steadily over that period, the budget for the seventh EU Research Framework Programme (FP7) will be roughly €50 billion (US\$60 billion). That’s €20 billion

less than originally proposed by the European Commission, which aimed to double research spending by 2013.

A research-friendly majority in the European Parliament had also hoped for more. On 18 January, the parliament rejected the proposed EU budget by 541 votes to 56, forcing governments to renegotiate. “We don’t reject the budget lock, stock and barrel,” says Jorgo Chatzimarkakis, a liberal democrat MEP from Germany. “But we can’t accept cuts in research that are disproportionately larger than in agriculture and structural funds.”

Although the possibility of an extra few billion euros for research may please